

## Reimagining Ubuntu in schools: a perspective from two primary school leaders in the Democratic Republic of Congo

### Abstract

Communalism, otherwise known as 'Ubuntu' in African literature, has come to signify the philosophical and ethical thought capable of transforming behaviours/lives and restoring the continent's cultural identity. This potent energy is captured in this article with a critical discussion on the conceptual, cultural and operational statuses of Ubuntu. While inhumanity across Africa has prompted some to question its viability, others, including the view in this article, see, in these testing times, an opportunity to reinvent the concept. Using narrative data from two urban primary heads based in Kinshasa/Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the article highlights unique Ubuntu operational patterns of: understanding others' needs, negotiating and prioritising needs, assessing available resources, attending to others' needs, and raised expectations and commitment to organisational goals. This process, the article notes, can successfully happen in the context of genuine dialogue; a compromise that not only prevents 'bogus needs' and sees beyond limited resources, but also serves the interests of both individuals and schools.

**Key words:** Africa; DRC; School leadership; Ubuntu; Urban schools

### Introduction

There is evidence that gender, race, religion and particularly culture affect the practice of leadership (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998), although school leadership has been criticised for being mono-cultural (Bolden & Kirk, 2009) and (gender, race, culture) neutral (Showunmi et al., 2015). Hence, sensitivity to culture without making it a static, passive and impervious entity is important (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). It is with this outlook that Ubuntu – the African sense of community, interdependence and care – is discussed here in a way that is hopefully meaningful not only to post-colonial Africa but also to non-African contexts. More precisely, this article seeks to discuss a unique approach of Ubuntu as it is enacted by the combined experiences of two urban primary head teachers in Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The

wider DRC-English comparative research on which this article is based had three objectives: to understand participants' pathways to school leadership, identify their leadership challenges and make sense of their leadership responses to the challenges encountered (Elonga Mboyo, 2017a). One of the research questions that the present paper aims to reflect on was framed as follows: how do you go about responding to your leadership challenges?

A significant part of the DRC participants' responses was dominated by talk of humanism, prompting the upcoming discussion. To proceed, a literature-based setting of the scene is necessary. The first part of the article, therefore, explores three questions: 1) what is the nature of Ubuntu? 2) is Ubuntu distinct to and different from other cultural traditions (for example the West)? and 3) are the theoretical characteristics of Ubuntu reflected in the everyday living of Africans? The author takes the view that inhumanity in Africa should be interpreted as an opportunity for reinvention, re-imagination (Chimakonam, 2016; Eliastam, 2015) and 're-inculturation of the spirit of' (Msila, 2014: 11747) Ubuntu. Hence, the second section describes the context and methodology of the research that is aimed at demonstrating how the work of reinvention is carried out in the leadership experiences of two primary head teachers in Kinshasa. The third section analyses a few both brief and lengthy narrative extracts in order to elicit key themes. The fourth section discusses the developed themes, highlighting their stepped pattern amounting to a framework of action that is in turn critiqued. The final section shares the overall conclusion and implications for future research and practice.

### **Conceptual, cultural and experiential statuses of Ubuntu: a critique**

*What is the nature of African philosophical thinking?* Defining the exact conceptual parameters of whatever philosophical thought is claimed to be African is not an easy exercise. The convergence or commonality amidst divergent African cultures is summed up by the term 'communalism' (Dixon, 1977) that some (for example: Letseka, 2013; Littrell et al., 2012) explicitly refer to as Ubuntu.

When viewed as 'an ideal concept' (Venter, 2004: 149) with 'a set of desired goals' (Sogolo, 1993: 119), Ubuntu comes across as an aspirational concept that resides in the future and whose abstractness makes it not only difficult to define (Sebidi, 1988 as cited by Mnyaka & Mothhabi, 2005) but also subject to misinterpretation (Venter, 2004). Therefore, the imperativeness of conceptual clarity

around Ubuntu cannot be overstated, especially for a philosophy that is believed to exist across many African countries (Kamwangamalu, 1999). The starting point then when envisioning Ubuntu, is 'communalism' (Diop, 1962; Dixon, 1977; Gyekye 1997). Here, the existence of a single individual is borne out of his or her attachment to the community and, as Mbiti (1969: 109) put it, 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. Freedom is not the fruit of one's independence from others but the self's dependence with other selves, the wider community. The relational nature of Ubuntu implies interdependence, not only between individuals but also between individuals and their communities. The individuals that make up the community are not a collection of entities but interlinked/interdependent in human bonds of care, compassion, thoughtfulness, understanding and so on. (Le Roux, 2000).

The result of the above human bonds, Le Roux (2000) argues, is a community that is more stable, harmonious, trusting and dignified. Hence, although there is a subordination of individual needs in favour of those of the community (Kamwangamalu, 1999), the real beneficiaries of this community-oriented vision are individuals who emerge with more dignity (Murithi, 2007). This same thinking would have inspired Letseka (2012: 53), who draws from Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and British liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin, to argue that 'a considerable value may be attached to communality in individualistic societies, just as individuality is not necessarily trivialized within communalism. The two orientations can co-exist in different sectors of the same society'. The forgoing phrase '...they [communalism and individualism] can co-exist...' should not be thought of as synonymous with an automatically successful relationship. Elonga Mboyo (2016b) sees that co-existence (structuration) sitting on four ontological spaces that are generated by two core tenets: fear for agents and self-scrutiny for structures, which are represented by leaders. When framed on a cross-shaped low / high sliding scale, as shown in the figure (1) below, they generate four ontological spaces, within which African Ubuntu interactions occur. While the whole outline of the methodology of Ubuntu can be accessed from the above publication, it suffices to highlight here that Ubuntu, as a theoretical tool to investigate various topics including tribal(ism), journalism, politics, legal systems, ethical isomorphs (Elonga Mboyo, 2017b) and many more, flourishes at quadrant 4 when agents are low in fear and structures are high in self-scrutiny. For Elonga Mboyo (2016b), then, Ubuntu is arguably greater than an exclusive theory of 'right' actions (Metz, 2007) and that citizens should be aware of both the bad and the good of their

society in order to take responsibility, hold themselves and others to account and understand the patterns of movement within different quadrants as well as from immoral actions (Quadrants 1, 2 and 3) to right ones (Quadrant 4) and vice versa.

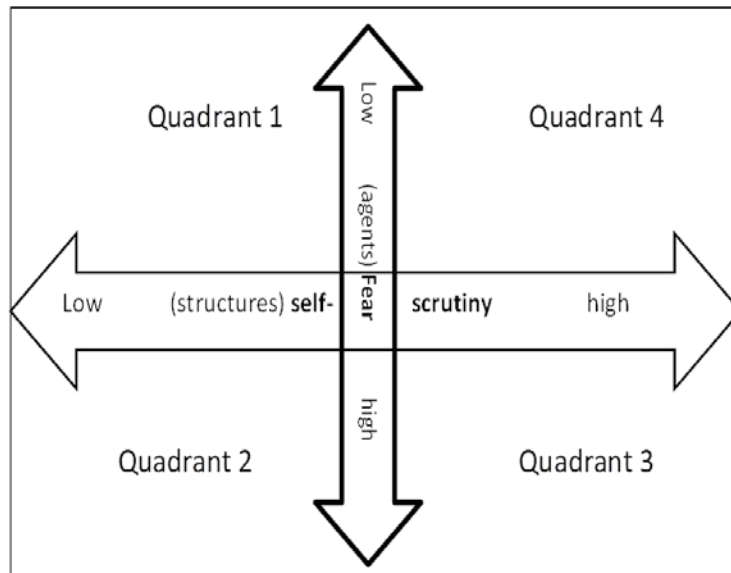


Figure 1: F/S Methodology of Ubuntu/Structuration framework, adapted from Elonga Mboyo (2016b)

A way of transmitting these learnable values, according to Venter (2004) and Obiakor (2004), would be by incorporating them into school curricula across Africa, in order to develop patriotic leaders and build communities that are more in touch with their identity. In response, the methodology of Ubuntu (Elonga Mboyo, 2016b), as a leadership approach, has been adapted as an integral part of (global) citizenship curriculum (Elonga Mboyo, 2016a) for schools. It is worth noting that Ubuntu, in this regard, is constitutive of the end-goal of education. As a leadership approach, Ubuntu is also a means to an end, as is the overall thrust of this paper. When viewed as both a means and an end, Ubuntu then becomes the exception to the call that school leaders should distinguish between their leadership models as ‘a means’ and the ‘purpose/end’ of education (Begley, 2010).

In short, this section has articulated some conceptual uncertainties around Ubuntu that have arguably contributed to a scholarly consensus on the underlying vision of Ubuntu; the impact of its characteristics potentially being beneficial to (African) society.

*Is Ubuntu a distinct African philosophical thinking?* The need for (existence of) an African philosophical narrative has been vigorously defended by some, who identify a clear dichotomy between African and Euro-American world views. As the figure below demonstrates, Dixon (1977), for example, outlines those differences along the lines of axiology, epistemology and logic.

Orientation	Euro-American	African
<b>Axiologies</b>		
Human/nature relations	Man-to-object (I-It); mastery over nature; individualism	Man-to-person (I-Thou): harmony with nature; communalism
Time	Future; divisible; linear clock	Past-present; continuous; felt
Activity	Doing	Being
<b>Epistemology</b>	Object-Measure; cognition	Affect-Symbolism; Imagery
<b>Logic</b>	Either-or	Diunital

*Figure 2: African-oriented and Euro-American-oriented philosophical characteristics, adapted from Dixon (1977).*

On the grounds of the above differences, the African and non-African alike is often reminded of the richness of African philosophy and values that were arguably dislodged by colonisation and Christianity. Ayittey (2010), for example, defends the existence of values of accountability or checks and balances in chiefdoms and kingdoms to avoid despotism which inhabits every society including that of the West.

Ayittey's case for an autonomous African way of life can be interpreted as a rebuke to those who might perceive of the African way of life as devoid of the values, such as democracy, that are present in the Western society. It also stands in contrast to those who portray African systems as based on 'autocratic leadership [that] expects subordinates to be submissive and obedient' with a rigid authority system that can consequently breed 'widespread corruption and injustices' (Beugré & Offodile, 2001: 540-538). While these issues can be resolved by a return to African value systems according to Ayittey (op. cit.), Beugré and Offodile (op. cit.) suggest a culture-fit model

based on the principles of integration (accommodating effective non-African practices of leadership) and eradication (of those African practices that prevent effective leadership).

It is legitimate to ask whether the return to the broad African value system of collectivism and humanism, otherwise known as Ubuntu (Letseka, 2013; Littrell et al., 2012), is absolutely different from other value systems that, according to Beugré and Offodile (op. cit.), need integrating. Although 'some authors see *Ubuntu* purely as a local concept, most elements of *Ubuntu* or the values that underpin it are universal whilst operating in the particular' (Venter, 2004: 159 citing Sindane & Liebenberg, 2000). The broad value system of Ubuntu bears some resemblance to Western collegial leadership models that privilege participative approaches (Bush, 2007), transformational leadership (Preece, 2003) and *bildung* in the sense of 'linking the self to the world' and an 'interchange between individuals' as discussed by the German scholar and intellectual Wilhelm von Humboldt (Letseka, 2012: 55). As discussed above (see figure 1), it has also been presented as the African version of structuration theory, where Ubuntu is framed as a set of four ontological realities that are based on fear and self-scrutiny cross-shaped interactions between African agents and their structures (Elonga Mboyo, 2016b).

That said, one is reminded once again that 'tinctured insights are the condition for dialogue and communication. But they are not the reason for the assimilation, integration or even dissolution of one experience into another' (Higgs, 2012: 48). Such dialogue and communication without the risk of assimilation is captured by Zoogah and Nkomo's (2013) framing of management research in Africa. In the third figure below, the above authors identify territorial research seeking to advance a uniquely African management stance that is vastly different from and dissimilar to the West.

Different from West	High	Territorial	Instrumental	
	Low	Symbolic	Sentimental	
		Low	Similar to West	High

Figure 3 'Identity of African management research choices' adapted from Zoogah and Nkomo (2012).

The symbolic frame is not concerned with a unique approach and emphasises neither African nor Western/global identities. The sentimental approach seeks to underline the similarities and, at the same time, overlook the differences. The instrumental approach, which, it could be argued, enables the dialogue without assimilation, seeks to define both the differences and similarities in research and leadership practices in Africa and outside of it.

The foregoing discussion of locating and asserting an African philosophical and ethical status within global variants mainly answers, perhaps in a non-definitive way, one key question. Overall, the case for a distinct (or not so distinct) African philosophy, ethics and management, to counter a predominantly Western mono-cultural thinking, especially in education, is widely accepted (Higgs, 2012; Higgs & Smith, 2002; Obiakor, 2004); although some see the claim for African cultural unity (Diop, 1962; Gyekye 1997; Molefi, 1987; Molefi & Kariamu, 1990) taking an essentialist approach at the expense of other discourses (Horsthemke & Enslin, 2008). Hence, for the reasons discussed below, there is the need to explore non-essentialist and contemporary dynamic interpretations of Ubuntu, especially in urban school leadership, using, in this case, the combined experiences of Kinshasa-based (DRC) primary head teachers.

*How is the African philosophical thought (Ubuntu) lived out?* This question seeks to assess how the concept 'Ubuntu' is operationalised or experienced across Africa. The desired impact of Ubuntu is, to some extent, limited. African businesses still prefer the managerial (top down) rather than the communitarian approach (Littrell et al., 2013), which is perhaps due to another cultural interpretation expecting

‘absolute’ allegiance to elders that lends itself to autocratic forms of governance (Beugré & Offodile, 2001). Ubuntu is also still negated by experiences of hardship endured under unpatriotic and corrupt African political leadership (Obiakor, 2004). Waghid (2015: 1235) has noted that the ‘inhumanity perpetrated against people on the African continent remains endless and horrifying’ and that ‘Ubuntu should be actualised in their lived experiences, particularly in relations between individuals and others’. What Waghid is deploring here concerns the negative manifestations of what Elonga Mboyo (2016b) still describes as Ubuntu that is instead occurring within quadrants 1, 2 and 3 of his *‘methodology of Ubuntu’* theory (see figure 1 above).

The deplorable state in which Ubuntu is lived out should not imply that it (at its quadrant 4 state – see figure 1) is inexistent in African cities and villages. The embodiment of Ubuntu may have been eroded by colonisation, Christianity, Apartheid and continues to be so by urbanisation, dictatorship and responses to such regimes (Ayittey, 2010; Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005) and all the ills that (wrongly or rightly) portray it as an ‘unpromising’ ethical concept (Metz, 2016: 2). However, its valued meaning (or meanings) continues to be reinvented through, for example, ‘surrogate extended family’ (Williams, 1996: 8). This shows the capacity of Ubuntu to outlast both (transitory) communal bonds that it creates and negative historical events that seek to negate it. The perceived transition or mutation process of Ubuntu validates both the dynamism of culture (Collard, 2007), including Ubuntu, and Eliastam’s (2015: 1) proposed ‘creative re-imagining and recovery of Ubuntu’ that, according to the author, is in a liminal state. Ubuntu is neither at its end, as suggested by Matolino & Kwindigwi (2013), nor at its beginning point, as counter-argued by Metz (2015); instead, it needs re-invention (Chimakonam, 2016).

Arguably, the recovery, re-imagining and/or re-invention is thus far based on limited empirical studies, which can take different approaches, such as excavating culture (Ubuntu) as it was historically lived by ancestors, relying on the interpretation of the historical past and based on contemporary manifestations as the people (Africans in this case) come into contact with various local and global developments (Weiburst, 1989). Each of these approaches has methodological and epistemological repercussions as to what constitutes data and knowledge. For example, the proponents of a historical view of Ubuntu (or any cultural or leadership concept in Africa and beyond) would favour methodologies that would generate data that lend themselves to pre-conceived (ancestral) notions of the topic being researched (Ubuntu



in this case). In this approach, re-imagining Ubuntu, through either people's interpretations of the historical past or how Ubuntu manifests itself through the lives and professional practice of contemporary Africans (or others), may seem superficial, tainted and, in Zoogah and Nkomo's (2012) terminology (see figure 3), sentimental. The data from this research and meanings derived from them are part of this on-going tension that must remain open and logically persuasive.

That said, (African) leaders and scholars engaging in these debates have the responsibility to ensure that the recovery of what is good about African (or any culture) culture also means the formation of new identity, a project which is at the centre of the African renaissance movement (Mbeki, 1999; 2001). Although some writers have either offered frameworks or recognised the transformative power of Ubuntu in school leadership (Preece, 2003; Ncube, 2010), the field of African educational leadership is only beginning to explore the concept, in the way of using head teachers' experiences to test out the effectiveness of predefined Ubuntu-related values of participation and service (Msila, 2008; 2014), for example. Even such efforts are limited to South Africa; although Brubaker (2013) has employed a quantitative approach in Rwanda to argue for its effectiveness as an alternative leadership model in schools.

Using a new constituency of professionals from the DRC, this paper seeks to discuss how Ubuntu is being reinvented in answer to the research question: how do you go about responding to your leadership challenges? Ubuntu is reported to work well in non-static organisations (Msila, 2014). However, Msila's proffered dynamism is said to work when professionals' mind-set is open to embrace Ubuntu values. In turbulent times of inhumanity and urbanisation, as discussed above, little is known about how head teachers, in some parts of Africa, are reimagining and working to relive Ubuntu in urban schools. While using some of the constructs discussed above to make sense of the data to be presented hereafter, it is against the above background of reimagining Ubuntu that the lived experiences of two urban primary head teachers in Kinshasa/DRC are discussed here.

### **Context and methodology**

Despite the high levels of poverty across the DRC, estimated at 70% living below the poverty line by the African Development Bank (ADB, 2014), decades of political instability (Clark, 2008) and years of underinvestment in the education sector (Mokonzi, 2010), formal schooling still remains an attractive option for many parents

with school age children (De Herdt et al., 2012). Hendriks et al. (2012), however, estimate that thousands more children still inhabit the streets of the country's capital Kinshasa without any formal or informal education. The data used for this article formed part of the author's 2014-2016 comparative study of leadership experiences of urban head teachers in the DRC and England. The experienced DRC heads, whose names have been anonymised as Bafote and Lokuli and who are the focus of this article, were both working in urban city of Kinshasa. They, therefore, met the two research participant selection criteria of being experienced and leading a school in an urban area. That they both turned out to be Catholic and, respectively, in charge of a Catholic school called 'Baf' and a private school named 'Lok' was incidental. Both primary schools took children aged between 5 and 11. Baf had an overall number of 740 pupils shared between 32 full/part-time staff, while Lok had 250 children taught by 6 full-time teachers. Without government and outside subsidies, both schools depended on school fees paid by the parents of the pupils.

The study employed a narrative approach since story telling is not only part of human living (Murray, 2008), it is also typically African (VanZanten, 2012) and essential in meaning making (Caduri, 2013) that has the potential to influence actions (Bruner, 2012). Goodson (2013) argues that stories of actions should be understood within theories of context. Hence, the study utilised two analytical processes: the thematic approach (Bold, 2012) that sought to make sense of the heads' leadership pathways, challenges and leadership actions (stories of actions) and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Wandermause et al., 2014) to delve into the underpinning ontological scope, responses to scope and values that guided thematised stories of actions (theories of context). The present paper, though, only focusses on the abstracted themes that throw more light on unique patterns of Ubuntu leadership in two DRC schools; in other words, the stories of actions that developed as the heads narrated their leadership experiences with regard to the following research question: how do you go about responding to your leadership challenges? Narratives can be presented in many ways, including through lengthy excerpts (Williams, 1984) and brief ones (Ewick & Silbey, 2003). The approach adopted here is a combination of brief and lengthy excerpts that were collected after 5 leadership conversations lasting between 40 and 95 minutes each and followed up by telephone conversations. Although the data is self-reporting, its validity and trustworthiness is

ensured by the consensual and candid nature of the data collection process. Having more than one conversation and the subsequent telephone conversations also helped to determine the coherence and clarify some inconsistencies in their narratives. Complementarity of narratives is deemed to be the most appropriate measure of the validity of narrative research (Floyd, 2012). Hence, the trustworthiness of the narrative extracts used for this article can be defended by the complementarity of Bafote and Lokuli's narratives.

### **Findings and analysis**

The findings on 'reimagining' Ubuntu in DRC schools can be fully appreciated when they are presented against the backdrop of the leadership challenges encountered. These challenges can be summed up as societal (breakdown of the social moral code being reflected in schools), poor organisational working conditions (lack of resources in pupils' homes and schools, low wages reflecting how teachers are less valued for the work done, transportation issues) and poor educational competencies (for pupils and teachers). This article focusses on poor working conditions, which are partly captured by tales of extreme poverty with which head teachers are confronted. The following extract sums up the nature of the challenges that both Lokuli and Bafote experience:

Yesterday, when we [Lokuli speaking to me the researcher] were here [location of the conversation], they [referring to the secretary] called me [Lokuli] saying: there is a teacher who wants to be treated. He must have an X-ray done and needs \$15. There is another teacher who calls me saying: my university child needs money for fees. It happened to me yesterday but since I had a bit of cash, I solved two cases. Before that [referring to a recent incident], I had three cases. In the morning, a teacher comes to tell me that his child was sick. Another came to tell me that his brother was sick. The third came to tell me that they had bereavement in the family and that he had to contribute.

The above examples could be considered as some of the unparalleled educational challenges of Sub-Saharan Africa (Brock & Alexiadou, 2013) that convey the broken state of the DRC's educational infrastructure. They could, however, be dismissed as 'partial', considering that there are capacity building initiatives in other

parts of Kinshasa/DRC where, through the help of various partners, new schools are being built while old ones are renovated (UNOPS, 2010-13). That said, with high poverty levels (ADB, 2014) and record numbers of unschooled children (Hendriks et al., 2012), the above examples are representative of the lack of investment in DRC's education system over the years (Mokonzi, 2010). The above stories also corroborate the assertion that head teachers in Africa (encompassing the DRC) work in under-resourced environments (Bush & Udoro, 2006). This raises the challenge of motivating/realigning extremely deprived staff to raise the quality of an education system that owes its structural resilience partly to parental contributions and third party support (De Herdt et al., 2012).

School leadership is recognised as essential for school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2008). As policy makers digest the magnitude of the problem and work out a response strategy, it is worth learning from the leadership practices that have developed on the heels of the above circumstances. Once again, this report only focuses on a single lens of school leadership (Ubuntu) within the overall original comparative research (Elonga Mboyo, 2017a) that led to further claims and theorising of (comparative) educational leadership. That said, the data extracts (below) summarise Bafote and Lokuli's responses that may resonate (or not) with other practitioners in other settings.

While both Bafote and Lokuli underlined the importance of humanism (Ubuntu), Bafote stressed the understanding of others' (teachers) needs, followed immediately by attending to those needs and then noting the raised commitment. Lokuli, however, brought other insights (negotiating priorities, assessing resources and raised expectations) that on closer analysis fit well, if placed between Bafote's actions, to build a much bigger contextual picture of how Ubuntu is being reimaged.

Bafote noted the initial need to recognise the needs of others – meaning teachers:

I do my work with authority and humanism. By humanism I mean understand the discomfort of others. Times, a teacher says look Mr head teacher, I am in need ..., then I say ah take this... you will reimburse at the end of the month ... and all these are the ingredients that make friends (meaning his staff) have acceptance. *Bafote*

Lokuli then stressed the pertinence of negotiating in order to prioritise needs:

Two teachers who tell me, Mr. Director, we [teacher and family] have not eaten for two days. Can you give me an advance on my salary? There is another that tells me look, my child is sick. Tell me, which one am I going to serve? I will serve the one whose child is ill. *Lokuli*

Lokuli went on to underline the importance of assessing the resources available in order to attend to needs:

I checked how much money we have, called them to my office and explained it to them and work out the priorities. *Lokuli*

Only then, can Bafote's attendance to needs be envisaged. He does that through the use his school's petty cash meant for buying school's teaching equipment and maintenance of the school sanitary utilities.

You see a teacher coming, he is exhausted! He has a problem at home: the child is sick but he has no resources. I draw 100,000 FC [+/- \$100, money designed specifically for the monthly running cost of Baf] and tell him you'll return me the money in 2 or 3 months. With the child recovered, whatever I ask him to do; he will do so quickly and well. For this person, I have to do everything he asks me. *Bafote*

Acting in this way, Lokuli argues, places some expectations on the part of teachers:

Like all self-respecting leaders, I cannot accept just about anything. I demand the following from staff: punctuality, attendance, and a job well done. *Lokuli*

For Bafote, such expectations lead to teachers' commitment:

All these [referring to acts of humanism] are the ingredients that make friends (meaning his staff) have acceptance ... to the work 'de façon consentie' [in a consensual manner]. *Bafote*

To illustrate the commitment, Bafote paraphrased a conversation with one of his staff with following words:

People freely accept what you ask them to do and they do it. I had asked staff to get involved in one project and I asked them, how are you. They said: very tired Sir but if it were not because of you we would not have been able to - meaning they wouldn't have done it.

## Discussion

It must be noted that both Bafote and Lokuli neither referred to the word *Ubuntu* nor used a local variation (Bomoto, for example) of Ubuntu that, according to Newenham-Kahindi (2009), is present in East, Central and Southern African Bantu regions. They, instead, explicitly used the French equivalent of humanism: 'Humanisme'. Putting the different humanistic responses that Bafote and Lokuli gave to build a coherent chain of Ubuntu actions, the study puts forward a unique pattern of doing Ubuntu in an urban setting, where educational outcomes need to be raised despite severe financial needs of teachers in this case. Granted that the above abstracted themes are consistent with the data, figure 4 below organises them in a simple circular shape to re-imagine the possible cyclical nature of Ubuntu as it moves from reflection to action stage. What then follows is the author's attempt to explain, critique and reflect on the figure below.

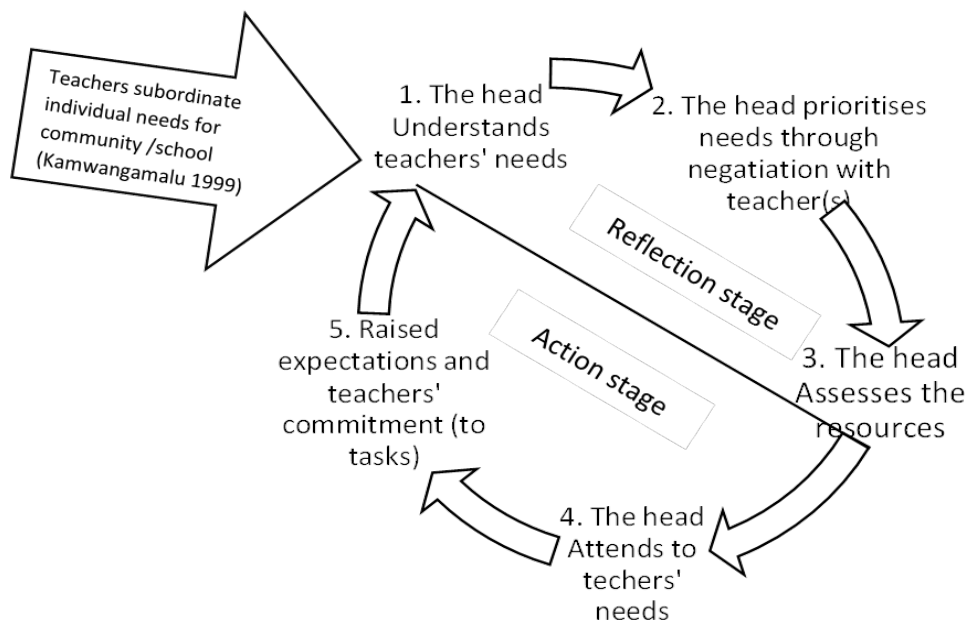


Figure 4: Ubuntu-from reflection to action

It is important to remember that none of the participants provided narratives for each stage of the above framework. It could be argued, therefore, that they individually enacted only parts of the framework and may not necessarily have been operating with the full framework in mind. As already indicated when reviewing the literature, Ubuntu has the capacity to outlast (transitory) communal bonds. In the same vein, it is broader than its incomplete manifestations in the actions of individual people. The role of a researcher then is to illicit meanings and connect the dots, so to speak, in order to capture the dynamism of Ubuntu through a framework that is the result of an analytical exercise based on how narratives around a particular theme (Ubuntu in this case) complement each other. There are, therefore, three implications to bear in mind for the subsequent discussion:

1) The discussion does not seek to demonstrate how the emerging, yet untested, Ubuntu framework has enhanced school improvement and/or school effectiveness agendas. The framework only lays claim on the individual needs that are met by an Ubuntu-inspired leader and the teacher's commitment to organisational goals which, in turn, depend on other variables such as getting the right goals in place in the first place. Besides, in the context of the broader research (Elonga Mboyo, 2017a) on which this article is based, Ubuntu leadership is deployed only as one of the many constructs of comparatively skilled leaders who, at certain moments in time and space, felt the need to engage in such interactions.

2) Hence, the nascent framework, that captures how Ubuntu is being reimagined, is discussed in terms of its potential for school leadership. It does so by exploring the strengths and limitations of the above rather straightforward framework based on the following themes: *individual and community needs served, task or people-oriented, bogus needs and limited resources, dialogue, abstract resources, compromise, and humanity into performativity*.

3) It may be the case, at first glance, that the framework, that is directly linked to the narratives, applies only to professionals working in the DRC and/or similar circumstances of hardship where money issues of staff become the concern of the head teacher. However, when the themes for discussion are looked at closely (see implication 2 above), one begins to realise that these head teachers' actions were not meaningless random acts of kindness. The weight attached to the narratives that have

now led to the development of the above framework (figure 4) serves as an operational platform for school leaders in various contexts beyond the DRC or Africa to effectively address leadership matters relating to ‘balancing individual and community needs’, ‘focusing on task and/or people’, ‘bogus needs and limited resources’, ‘engaging in dialogue’, ‘developing abstract resources’, ‘compromise’, and ‘humanity into performativity’.

*Individual and community needs served:* The context of practice (schools) is known to significantly shape teachers’ identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009); so do teachers’ personal experiences outside of school (Goodson & Cole, 1994). Therefore, sensitivity to individual life circumstances is essential if mediated school visions are to be enthusiastically and consensually implemented. However, for African people, their philosophy of life (Ubuntu) requires them to privilege the common good over and above personal interests. In such a context, step 1 on the above figure invites an Ubuntu-inspired leader to make of teachers’ individual needs his or her concern. Hence, the point at which the individual is expected to subordinate his or her needs in favour of the community/organisation (Kamwangamalu, 1999), as illustrated by extra arrow pointing to step1 (see above figure), it could be argued, is also the same one that the community/organisation (school) seeks to understand the needs of the individual, as exemplified by Bafote’s attempt to understand the discomfort of others (teachers in this case). Hence, Bafote demonstrated how the needs of the community (school) and those of the individuals (teacher) can co-exist (Letseka, 2012).

*Task or people-oriented?* Based on the above discussion, one may (hastily) pin Ubuntu to the people-oriented category of leadership rather than task-oriented (Millward & Hopkins, 1998). While Ubuntu, in this case, starts off with the creation of human rapport based on understanding the discomfort of others, the cycle ends with commitment to the task, which renders artificial the task versus people-oriented dichotomy and supports the motivational characteristic of Ubuntu, when applied in this way by school leaders.

*Bogus needs and limited resources:* The second step is that of dialogue, which, in this case, is initiated by the school leader, in terms of working out the most urgent priorities and necessities. In reality, however, the dialogue started much earlier when, despite the potential for embarrassment resulting from sharing their personal and



desperate situations, the teachers summoned the courage to engage with the heads. Two possible issues could compromise the 'reflection-action' Ubuntu process. The first concerns the possibility that stories can be made up by teachers to take advantage of a generous Ubuntu-inspired leader. The second point is to do with the limited nature of resources that could restrict the head's ability to move this reimagined Ubuntu leadership practice from reflection to action stage.

*Dialogue within the methodology of Ubuntu:* The above considerations could be resolved if the leader is operating from a correct ontological space within the methodology of Ubuntu (Elonga Mboyo, 2016b – see figure 1). In the case of Bafote and Lokuli's actions, the teachers in this study were low in fear and decided to share their situations with their heads, who arguably responded with high self-scrutiny evidenced by genuine negotiations, prioritising of needs and assessing the level of resources before making a decision to attend to teachers' needs or not. Dialogue is more than talking. It is about understanding and affirming one another (Ryan, 2007: 33) within fair and equitable processes (Buchanan and Badham, 2011) that can build trust and secure commitment, even if resources are overstretched and the leader is unable to turn good intentions into concrete actions. In keeping with the spirit of re-imagining Ubuntu (Chimakonam, 2016; Eliastam, 2015), this dialogue needs to go beyond operational aspects of leadership between heads and teachers. School-based actors can exercise operational powers, as well as reclaim criteria power (Simkins, 2003), by engaging policy makers in low-fear and high-scrutiny discussions aimed at obtaining systemic changes that set the direction of the kind of education they want for the future.

*Mobilising material resources to boost abstract resources:* Although the availability of resources is essential for educational access and improved outcomes (Curto et al., 2011; Zuze & Leibbrandt, 2011; Zuze & Reddy, 2013), the operational as well as the criteria power to manage (Simkins, 2003) and right management of those resources also matters (Al-Samarrai, 2006). Given the autonomy to manage school funds, the head's attempt to assess the resources may seem a routine exercise. For those who have limited control of the school budget or due to the budget not covering such demands as those faced by the heads in this study, the assessment and use of resources destined for other purposes becomes a subversive move, an approach that has been identified in England and Canada (De Angelis et al., 2007; Michalak, 2012).

Often framed in their financial/material nature (see step 3 in figure 4), abstract resources, in terms of the efficacious output of teachers, are often ignored (Wong & Norton, 2009). The danger of highlighting abstract resources lies in the unintended effect of de-personifying teachers. However, deploying material resources (step 4 in figure 4) to boost organisational abstract resources can yield results starting with more consensually committed teachers, as Bafote contends (step 5 in figure 4).

*Compromises:* Needs and values (around choices for distribution of resources, for example) have been identified as some of the reasons for organisational (schools included) conflict (Saiti, 2015). A school leader, then, needs to be politically astute (Bolman & Deal, 2008) when deciding who gets what, when and how (Lasswell, 1936). Ubuntu, especially at its negotiation point, moves along a political path where conflicts can either be triggered by what teachers might perceive to be unfair decisions in the face of real personal necessities or be avoided due to genuine dialogue as well as the deals that the head and teachers strike. Figure 4 illustrates this by showing how Bafote attended to his teachers' needs in the form of a short-term loan to be reimbursed in a manageable way. Ubuntu puts the 'care' back into political activity that is often associated with a game of losers and winners. While seeking to meet the goals of the organisation, achieving social justice for key workers, such as teachers, school leaders need to play the political game with a certain amount of care (Ryan, 2010).

*Humanity into performativity:* As African and Euro-American education systems continue to converge, creating new structures in nature (Stambach, 2006) and the need to raise standards in student outcomes is felt (Brock & Alexiadou, 2013), the urgency in meeting measurable targets – otherwise understood as performativity culture – (Troman et al., 2007) will undoubtedly become (it may already be) part of educational leadership in the DRC and various part of Africa. Ubuntu, in this case, helps to restore the human element in the mechanics of performativity by focusing attention on the long-term psychological contracts/commitment of staff to an organisational vision whose survival partly depends on them.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

*Conclusion:* This article began with an attempt to highlight the contested nature of Ubuntu in its conceptual, cultural and experiential dimensions. Despite legitimate misgivings, particularly about the way Ubuntu is experienced (Waghid, 2015), the

article has shown that the philosophy is being re-imagining (Chimakonam, 2016; Eliastam, 2015) in the area of educational leadership. Based on the discussion of Bafote and Lokuli's experiences of leadership, 'doing' Ubuntu in an urban school context in Kinshasa/DRC has been framed as following the pattern of understanding others' needs, negotiating and prioritising needs, assessing available resources, attending to others' needs, and raised expectations and commitment to organisational goals.

*Implications for practice:* In reimagining Ubuntu in this way, heads are invited to maximise the abstract resource output of their staff by making Ubuntu an approach that ensures both individuals' and schools' needs are met. Through genuine dialogue and possible compromise, the focus on tasks and performativity would be accompanied with a sense of humanity. It has been argued earlier that Ubuntu (incorporated in the curriculum) can become the end-goal of school leadership (Elonga Mboyo, 2016a; Obiakor, 2004; Venter, 2004). Otherwise, the task of identifying where to focus organisational action still needs to be defined.

*Implications for future research:* A multi-perspective methodological approach seeks to capture "evidence about both the 'production' and 'consumption' of leadership in schools" (Day et al., 2001: 20). Hence, a view from teachers and other stakeholders in 'Baf' and 'Lok' would have helped to gain a broader and enriched outlook on the whole experience of 'doing Ubuntu', as well as confirm certain claims like staff working in a consensual manner as a result of Ubuntu-inspired leadership actions (see Bafote's claim). However, the findings, as discussed here, present some flashes of how Ubuntu continues to be reinvented and reimagined by professionals in contemporary Africa. The steps, pattern or framework outlined here could aid further reflections on the operational status of Ubuntu in the context of school leadership and perhaps in other areas of life.

*Further questions:* Ubuntu stands as an ethical prototype that is not a given but must be worked upon (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012) in order to bear results, in this case, of boosting commitment to organisational goals. However, the transactional nature of 'attending to needs' in exchange for 'commitment to the task' (see steps 4&5 in figure 4) raises the question as to whether Ubuntu-inspired leaders who want the organisation (school) to survive can (ever) be beneficent or altruistic in the sense of

adopting 'an approach that suggests that actions are moral if their primary purpose is to promote the best interest of others' (Northouse, 2013: 425). It makes sense, however, if the concept of 'other' is intrinsically linked with 'one's self' as it is understood from an African perspective. It also raises the question about the nature of the task to which staff are expected to commit: whether it is shared leadership activity or a prescribed set of duties that need to be fulfilled.

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